Conservation group calls 2009 a banner year

Upstate Forever celebrates protection of almost 4,000 acres

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WALHALLA — Upstate Forever, an organization promoting sensible growth and the protection of the area's natural and historical landmarks, reported Thursday that 2009 was a banner year for land protection.

Upstate Forever conservation official Mary Hays Huguley said the organization has helped to protect more than 3,800 acres of farms, fields, forests, waters and wildlife habitat in the 10-county Upstate region, including more than 500 acres in Oconee County.

In November, Upstate Forever announced that the 244-acre Chestnut Return property in Seneca had been protected through a conservation agreement signed by Dr. Joe James and his wife, Sandra.

James is a member of Oconee Forever, a local group rallying support for the establishment of an Oconee County Conservation Bank.

The local conservation bank would allocate hometown funding to the protection of important lands exclusively in Oconee County.

Upstate Forever also helped protect the 336-acre Rose Hill Farms parcel that borders Oconee Station State Park and Sumter National Forest.

Dana Leavitt, Upstate Forever's land trust director, called the protection of Rose Hill Farms a "top priority " and a "reason to celebrate."

Through a conservation easement funded by the South Carolina Conservation Bank, John Ivester and his family retain ownership of the land, but agree to limit its development for the enjoyment of future generations. The tract is a scenic buffer and wildlife corridor consisting of rolling hills, steep ravines and pastures.

Huguley said Upstate Forever has worked with 73 landowners to protect more than 14,000 acres since the group was formed in 1998.

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FILE PHOTO

This waterfall is part of the more than 300 acres of the Rose Hill Farms property protected by Upstate Forever.